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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 001833

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES DEMONSTRATIONS AND IRAN WITH
MINISTER OF STATE FOR CABINET AFFAIRS SHAIKH AHMED BIN
ATEYATALLA

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: During a meeting with the Ambassador December 4 newly-appointed Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs and head of the Central Informatics Organization Shaikh Ahmed Bin Ateyatalla Al Khalifa expressed dismay at recent public disturbances, saying that they damage the business climate. GCC neighbors have their eyes on the Bahraini democratic experiment and are discouraged when they see problems. He expressed concern about Iran's nuclear ambitions and called attention to the recent name change of the Bahraini branch of an Iranian bank. Shaikh Ahmed said he has proposed that the GOB appoint an official government spokesperson for the first time. He also said that the younger generation of GOB officials have helped usher in Information Technology (IT) reform. End Summary.

Visitors Want Fun, Not Demonstrations

2. (C) In a meeting December 4 with Shaikh Ahmed Bin Ateyatalla, the Ambassador asked about the GOB reaction to recent demonstrations and violence in the streets. Shaikh Ahmed lamented the recent activities, saying that when visitors to Bahrain see demonstrations and perceive a threat, they do not want to return. These visible protests damage the business climate. He pointed out that Bahrain is a social and democratic experiment for other GCC countries. Neighbors watch closely what happens in Bahrain, and if the perception is that the experiment is progressing in a negative direction, they will shy away from democratic progress.

3. (C) Shaikh Ahmed continued that the petition signed by 28 members of the Council of Representatives against hotels serving alcohol during Ramadan does not bode well for the progressive social and business climate, which many are trying to foster. Shaikh Ahmed stated that Dubai has been effective in making Emiratis "share holders" in its becoming a tourist hub, but that municipal councils in Bahrain have blocked potential investment projects that would likely have attracted tourists. Many Saudis visit Bahrain to enjoy themselves, but if there is the perception that Bahrain does not provide fun for people, they will stop visiting Bahrain. He said that even alcohol-free Kuwait is making strides at providing enjoyable activities for residents and visitors including parties and concerts.

Concerns About Iran

4. (C) Shaikh Ahmed expressed concern about the influence of Iran and Shi'a clerics in Bahrain and said that the GCC is very nervous about Iran's nuclear aspirations. He explained that Iran has long considered Bahrain a part of Iran; up until 20 years ago the Iranian parliament had two members that were considered representatives of the Bahraini islands. He said there are indications that Iran has made Shaikh Isa Qassem a representative spiritual head, "ayatullah," here in Bahrain, authorized to collect "al-khums," for Shi'a, the one-fifth share of one's savings donated each year in support of community religious activities. He also said that a well-known Iranian bank recently changed its name to Future Bank, allegedly to mask its origins, and that it is a conduit for funds to and from Iran.

GOB Image Needs Shining

5. (C) In the area of Cabinet affairs, Shaikh Ahmed said that he is heading a media committee, which is focusing on GOB public relations. The GOB has not been effective at spreading its message; it needs to inform the public better about what the government is accomplishing. He said that the GOB has not had an official government spokesperson before but expressed the need to appoint someone to this role. (Note: The press reported this week that, for the first time, the MFA plans to appoint a spokesman to deal with foreign relations-related issues. End note.)

6. (C) The Ambassador inquired into recent press reports

about regulations on the posting of signs and banners in public. Shaikh Ahmed said that the posting of unauthorized signs had gotten out of control and was aesthetically unpleasant. Some signs present sectarian issues promoting disunity in the society. He said that the GOB has formed a committee which will accept applications, verify that the signs do not present anything contrary to Bahraini law, and approve posting of the signs for a defined period of time.

Embracing Technology

17. (C) Regarding Bahraini government reform, Shaikh Ahmed said that the younger generation of government ministers is energetic and has the blessing of the King. He said that on some initiatives progress is happening so fast that the older ministers are letting go, stepping aside and allowing the change to happen. An example is the IT initiative the GOB has undertaken to connect 270 buildings throughout Bahrain, including all ministries, forming a government intranet. He explained that infrared, laser and microwave transmissions are all being used.

18. (C) Shaikh Ahmed explained that Bahrain has begun offering a "smart card" to its citizens on a voluntary basis; Bahrain is the first GCC country to do so. The card has two computer chips: the larger has 64K of memory and will contain one's identification numbers and personal information; the second has 1K of memory and can be used for public transportation fares and other minor financial transactions. One memory slot has been reserved for the banking sector so that the card may be used for personal banking. Shaikh Ahmed described electronic gates to be installed at the airport for passport control purposes. Bahrain has used card specifications allowing compatibility with systems other GCC countries may adopt in the future.

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